



**US Army Corps
of Engineers**
Savannah District

News Release

Release No: 07-18

June 5, 2007

Southeast Corps of Engineers Districts prepared for long drought

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

ATLANTA, Ga. – As widespread and very severe drought conditions continue to dominate the weather in the southeastern United States, from North Carolina to Florida and westward to Mississippi, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers water managers and their partners are implementing drought plans and preparing contingency measures in anticipation of continued record dry conditions.

“Conditions are very severe,” said Brig. Gen. Joseph Schroedel, southeastern commander of the Corps. “Flow gauges and other measurements show that we are experiencing record low flows in rivers and streams throughout the region. Currently, reservoir inflows are running 20 to 40 percent of normal for this time of year. However all of our water resources partners in the region understand the seriousness of the issue and we are working hard with them to implement sensitive and balanced management measures to deal with this tough situation,” Schroedel said.

In North Carolina and southern Virginia, where the Corps manages five reservoirs (Falls, Jordan, Kerr, Philpott, and Kerr Scott), spring rainfall was adequate to maintain full or near-full water levels in these lakes. In recent weeks, however, drought conditions have taken hold in the area and available supplies must be managed carefully.

In Georgia and South Carolina there are nine major Corps projects (Hartwell, Russell, Thurmond, Lanier, Allatoona, Carters, West Point, Walter F. George, and Seminole) which are authorized to provide hydroelectric power, recreation, water supply, fish and wildlife enhancement, water quality, flood control and navigation to the people of the region. Management of these lakes is governed by drought plans aimed both at individual lakes and at river systems.

“We have now reached Action Zone 3 at most of our lake projects,” said Col. Peter F. Taylor of the Corps’ Mobile District. Action Zone 3 refers to one of several benchmarks used to guide operations during drought conditions. “These lakes must meet a lot of needs,” Taylor said, “and,

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under the current drought conditions it will not be possible to meet all of them completely. It now becomes a balancing act of trying to meet as many needs as possible with the available water.”

“Obviously water supply and water quality become critical under these conditions,” he continued. “We are working closely with Southeastern Power Administration (SEPA) and other power agencies to reduce their demands for hydropower while the drought persists.”

Savannah District reservoirs – Lakes Hartwell, Russell, and Thurmond – are expected to reach a similar condition, Drought Level 1, by mid-June.

A reduction in hydropower production will benefit reservoir levels in several basins, including the Savannah River, the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint, and the Alabama-Coosa-Tallapoosa systems but could result in higher electricity costs as SEPA purchases power on the commercial market.

Another area that feels the immediate effects of lower lake levels is recreation. Several lakes have issued warnings about low water levels in swimming areas and the need for boaters to be especially watchful for stumps and other objects in the lakes that wouldn’t be an issue with higher levels. Private boat dock owners at Corps lakes should monitor water levels and take appropriate action to protect them as the water recedes.

Even with reductions in specific generation for hydropower, lake levels are expected to continue to fall as the drought persists. “In many areas of north Alabama and Georgia we are experiencing record low levels of rainfall,” said Taylor. “It will take a major rain event or storm system for these lakes to recover.”

Florida is also experiencing one of its worst droughts on record, and Corps water managers are working closely with the state to conserve water for human and environmental needs. State engineers and scientists are working on a request for a temporary deviation from normal operating procedures to make additional surface water available from the state’s water conservation areas to protect coastal well fields from saltwater intrusion. “Florida has a complex hydrology,” said Col. Paul Grosskruger, commander of the Corps’ Jacksonville, Fla., District. “The state’s sensitive ecosystems and large human population depend on proper management of water in a state which usually has an abundance of rainfall,” Grosskruger explained. “We are using a team approach, by partnering with all agencies to find the right solutions for the many challenges associated with water shortage issues.” Lake Okeechobee, in the center of Florida’s Everglades ecosystem, recently established a new all-time record low elevation. Lockages through the Okeechobee Waterway have also been progressively reduced in frequency over the last several weeks to conserve water in the system.

“The southeast region is facing what may be drought conditions unprecedented in their scope and severity,” Schroedel emphasized. “The effects are widespread and take a variety of forms.

Water managers with the Corps and the States have done extensive drought planning as a result of similar conditions which have occurred periodically since the 1980s. But managing water will not be enough by itself; weathering this drought will require discipline in water consumption, in the form of conservation measures that have already been implemented by several of the states.”

For more information about drought conditions and management of Corps projects in your area, call:

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